

Kunapipi

Volume 17 | Issue 3

Article 8

1995

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Ronnith, The Table of Memory, *Kunapipi*, 17(3), 1995.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/8>

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The Table of Memory

Abstract

It is a long trek to the house built on the bones of silence. Only the very small are allowed to enter this place. Only when you have finished everything on your plate will you be allowed to leave. The entrance opens to a long corridor. The carpet is rich and dark, its centre is covered in a thick plastic sheet to preserve it. You walk down the hall to the kitchen; a rich orange cordial is drunk out of glasses that once held candles. For food think thick doughy noodles in broth, think fish and baked potatoes. Think chicken. (The chicken a little dry, you took a long time arriving. You know six o'clock should mean six o'clock. But for you it means seven.) Think platters of sliced radish and turnip. For dessert there's stewed apples, and sips of sweet prune wine. There's coffee and almond biscuits, there's cake and the special liqueur chocolates for the grown-ups. Go on. Nem ztvei, take two. Naa. Take.

RONNITH MORRIS

The Table of Memory

It is a long trek to the house built on the bones of silence. Only the very small are allowed to enter this place. Only when you have finished everything on your plate will you be allowed to leave. The entrance opens to a long corridor. The carpet is rich and dark, its centre is covered in a thick plastic sheet to preserve it. You walk down the hall to the kitchen; a rich orange cordial is drunk out of glasses that once held candles. For food think thick doughy noodles in broth, think fish and baked potatoes. Think chicken. (*The chicken a little dry, you took a long time arriving. You know six o'clock should mean six o'clock. But for you it means seven.*) Think platters of sliced radish and turnip. For dessert there's stewed apples, and sips of sweet prune wine. There's coffee and almond biscuits, there's cake and the special liqueur chocolates for the grown-ups. Go on. *Nem ztvei, take two. Naa. Take.*

Anyone else would say hello; her greeting is *ess, ess, eat, eat*. The neighbour is a good man, a fine man, he has a good nature. He helps her from market to doorstep. It's a *schlep* in which he staggers down the hallway under the weight of her purchases towards the kitchen table. He's not so young any more. *So cheap*, she says. *So good, so fresh, so cheap*. She holds the broccoli up for both of you to inspect its multi-foliate head. You think they harvest broccoli from the sea, it's disappointing to discover it grows, like any other vegetable, out of the ground. She smiles the new teeth smile. The neighbour asks, *do they still hurt? No it's not the new ones that hurt. Sometimes, the old ones hurt. Still? Still*. He drinks his tea in noisy slurps and thanks her. *He is a gentleman. A mentch*. She tells you this in front of him. He smiles awkwardly – she places a hand on your shoulder and reminds him you are Hannahleh's eldest. *A shayneh maydele*, he says, *a beautiful, good girl*. He forks another slice of apple cake and eats. When he rises to leave, you all rise; she wipes her hands on her apron and together you walk him to the verandah.

Back inside you pass the formal sitting area with its white crushed-velvet lounge suite. The stiff arm covers protect the couch from wear. In this room the plate-faces of heroes gaze across the distance from mantelpiece to buffet. The one that perturbs you most is a gilt-edged portrait of a one-eyed army colonel. When you look at the colonel's face you can see how tightly his skin stretches to cover the skull beneath. This is the room where sepia photographs are confined in boxes of acid-free paper. You walk to the kitchen table past her gold and pink plastic

Eiffel towers; they sit on the glass of the sideboard that lines the corridor. You pass the monsteras and the kentia palms that clutch at you from the soil of their plastic pots, and enter the warm, safe place.

Fridge, oven and stove testify to grand days without want. *A glass of tea, with lemon? A hot chocolate, some nush?* More nush? Nush is the confectionary frogs she buys for your brother, and the peppermints she keeps for you. The old man, her husband, he has his diabetic jubes. After all this time you can picture him most vividly in front of the ABC television news. The words *In Canberra Today* bring him fist-clenching joy. He advises Gough Whitlam in Yiddish. And what's more, Gough follows his fervent counsel. Who knows where the old man is now? Probably with his pigeons. Don't laugh, this is serious business; he breeds them. When you ask her if he loves you as much as the birds she tells you *the same*. And her also? *The same*. *Don't smile*, she says, *it's a compliment*.

You, you're her favourite nusher. So good, the best girl in the world. To be big is to be good and you are *a groessir maydele, a shayneh maydele*, a big, beautiful girl. A good esser. *You want potato cakes, latkas? It doesn't have to be December for latkas. They're good to warm you in the cold*. Her hands peel and grate two potatoes and an onion into a shallow navy-rimmed enamel dish. An egg is mixed in, and then another one. Salt is added, not much but enough and some flour. She uses a large heavy silver-plated fork to stir the mix together. The lot is fried into a crisp interwoven whole. When you bite into it the inside is just cooked, the steam moistens the skin of your forehead and nose. You can't finish it; it's so big.

After dinner you bathe in a lilac bath tub, the bar heater is turned on especially; it radiates warmth from the hook on the wall. This type of clean differs from morning showers in which you wash, rinse and dry yourself quickly to make room for another sister. Here the floor tiles wink white, wink grey, wink purple in the steam and you can take your time. The face-cloth is a piece of kelp, a soap tug, an upper body warmer. And then as the water loses its heat you step into a towel, your back is patted dry, then it's into pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers and bed. Your covers are packed with goose down. You lie on pillows bigger than you, the flannel sheets are rough and comfortable, here in this house where you sleep to wake and wake to feast. When you return home they'll say *first we saw your stomach and then we saw you*.

You hear her walk to her reading in the kitchen. You turn on the light and rise. You place a chair on the bedside table and open the top section of the cupboard. The box of books, the children's schoolbooks, is there. It's heavy but you manage to draw it to your chest and step down. Your last step is a thud. She is standing at the door. *Come here*, she says as she hands you your dressing-gown. And you follow her with a novel in hand to the kitchen. The kettle is on, the candle flickers, the fluorescent light is steady. You ask her *What are you reading?* *A*

story, she answers. She asks you the same question and receives the same reply. Neither of you smile; both of you nod. This is as it should be. This is the best time. Reading here is a solemn matter. As her eyes follow her finger down the page she adjusts her glasses, moves her lips and reads on. When the words begin to blur you walk yourself back to bed.

Sometimes when its late you return from the bathroom and open the kitchen door – you expect her to be there. The room seems strangely unpeopled without her. A candle burns on the tabletop. The flicker of the flame is almost covered by molten-wax; it remains small but true. You get up to stare across black distance out of the kitchen window; all the light there is in the room provided by that weak flame. The moon's rays are hidden by cloud. The thin halo of light tints the aluminium and laminex surfaces the yellowed tones of an old photograph.

It is morning. She is squeezing oranges dry as you enter the kitchen. *Where are your slippers?* You sneeze and it's a cold. A cough and it's tuberculosis. *A serious illness.* You laugh? *It's not nice to laugh. It's not polite.* *Where are your slippers?* The toast is thickly spread with cream cheese and topped with plum jam. *Only a person who doesn't know to think doesn't know to put on slippers.* The kettle is steaming, and there's jam and vegemite. The vegemite has been bought especially for you. Every time you open the jar she wrinkles her nose as if she can detect its sharp yeasty smell from across the width of the table. And there's cake. This early in the morning? *Why not?* Here there is always cake. *An apple? A Golden Delicious?* You shrug *o.k.* and there it is, its skin in one piece in the tub for the garden and four seedless pieces on the plate in front of your glass. You cough again and are handed a cup of lemon tea sweetened with honey and fortified with brandy.

When you dress it is in a denim pinafore she has made and she is pleased you chose to wear it. Her own clothes are mostly hidden by a floral cloth apron. She favours 1950's house dresses. Your tights and skivvy are navy blue and your hair, pulled tightly away from your face, is fastened through a dark-blue clip into a high pony tail. You are at the park, you climb the slide and she watches you scream down. You race to her and in front of all the mothers and children she pulls your stockings up, spits on a tissue and wipes your face, as you tell her *no, don't*, you use her words, *it's not nice*. The smell of her spit is cloying, until you can get to a tap you wipe your face again and again on your sleeve.

It is early afternoon. Together you walk to the butcher where she orders her own and mameh's meat. The butcher hands you a *stickel* of something to chew on, a piece of kabana, which you put in your pocket. It's easier than saying you're a vegetarian. *You are growing into a fine girl and your grandmother, your buba, she's a balabuster's balabuster, a homemaker to respect* he tells you. As she orders from his wife he asks after mum. *Mameh is studying to be a kindergarten teacher*, you tell him. Buba stops ordering, she grasps hold of the word

kindergarten – *with four daughters and a son you'd think she'd have enough of kinder*. She pulls a face, *fooyah*. *For that you need an education? That's not a good work*. Then she asks what you want to become, you tell her a lawyer. *A liar*, she laughs. The butcher laughs also. *A liar. Better the medicine. Better a teacher*.

On your way home you stop in at the factory. The place is noisy, fabric scraps litter the concrete underfoot: a textile detritus of threads and cloth remnants. The building is shaped like an aeroplane hangar – inside, the engines struggle to take off. The smells of sweat, grease and new cloth mingle. The Singers hum. These are factory-issue machines, larger and louder than their domestic counterparts. Women gun bolts of material down the eye of the mechanical needle; most wear glasses, all wear tape-measure necklaces. Suspended above them are racks of clothes hangers heavy with the weight of finished product. An internal three-quarter wall separates the pressing area from the sewing machines. The movements of the women ironing are at once balletic and economical. No woman here is under forty. When they look up and notice the two of you they shout *Hello Lisel. This is Hannah's eldern*, she says, *Hannah's eldest*. She introduces you to Mrs Churney, and Mrs Shanetop, Mrs Kirsch and Mrs Levin. You have met them before. *A pleasure*, they say. *A shayneh maydele, a beautiful girl* they tell her.

Mr Shapiro, the boss, steps from machine to machine replacing the empty cardboard holders with new spools of thread. His dark suit cuffs trail pieces of cotton. Despite this he looks a tidy figure of a man. When he sees the two of you he walks up and shakes her hand; then he takes your hand between his two. *Mrs Raizen*, he says, *a pleasure*. *Hannah's eldest?* he asks her nodding at you. *Yes*, she replies, *the big girl*. *A shayneh maydele*, he says. He invites her into a partitioned space with a phone and a desk hardly visible for paper – his office. When he fetches her a glass of tea, with lemon, she is pleased and embarrassed. This is how it should be. He unfolds plans for a new cutting room. Together you walk to the old cutting room where two women navigate an invisible grid on their hands and knees; their instruments consist of blue pencils, white pencils, their charted landscape cloth and tissue paper. Another woman, a younger woman works the cutting table – really a very large table. *A machine can't do this*, Mr Shapiro says. The woman at the table laughs. *A machine doesn't have mine eyes*, she says.

When you leave, it is with a sack of material. At the kitchen table these pieces will become clothing. She is already planning an outfit for the baby, a dress for Mameh, overalls for you. *No, you don't need overalls*. You don't tell her the last pair she made were never worn. At the Tuckerbag you buy six cartons of skim milk. You carry them home in a cardboard box. *Who can drink so much? It's good to have in the house. But so much? It's not so much*.

Mameh buys her a sewing machine with computer memory. She

examines it but doesn't use it. She tells Mameh a new sewing machine is madness, *michegas, she's too old to learn this michegas*. For dinner she makes you barley soup with huge chunks of potato and pumpkin. Spinach is added last and floats on top. She broils trout and pours over the fish a mix of diced carrots, parsnips and onions; she adds a touch of dill. From under the sink she pulls out a glass of her own yoghurt; it's all she eats nowadays. You sup and talk and then you read, she pulls out her magnifying glass and the Yiddish newspaper. You offer to teach her to read English. *For what? So I can read Gorky and Tolstoy and Shalom and Alechim?* She keeps government correspondence and Heart Foundation newsletters just so you can explain. Together you fill in the Medicare forms.

The neighbour tells you, *you should help her she's not keeping things so nice as before. You should dust for her maybe?* You wash the dishes to make sure they're clean. She gets you to thread a dozen needles at a time. She knows how to put them in the old machine by touch and she's worked out a system to keep the colours distinct and nothing tangles. She says she can sew in a straight line with her eyes closed. *A person doesn't have to see everything.*

In her dark she becomes more and more silent. When she talks its to ask after you. *The study? The car? The work? The boyfriend? A boyfriend – it's not good to be alone.* Mameh is the one who becomes her memory, Mameh is the one who recounts her selling her wedding ring for a loaf of bread, or their boarding the last train out of Poland in exchange for a *stickel* salami. Buba never names the three nephews she buried in the snow of a D.P. camp after the war. Nor does she speak of her sister-in-law left behind in Poland. These things will be mentioned in the funeral elergy

We sit at the table. When I sift through her photographs and ask her about the dead she can't see to distinguish them from the living.